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MIAMI HERALD

27 July 1986

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Three planes readied to join contra fleet

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Los Angeles Times Service

WASHINGTON — Inside a battered steel hangar on an inconspicuous little airfield in Southern California, three small airplanes are being fitted out to become part of an unpredictable but potentially volatile new factor in Central America's guerrilla wars — the contras' air force.

The Nicaraguan rebels, with help from a network of former U.S. military and intelligence officers operating in this country, are quietly assembling and equipping a fleet of small aircraft that will give the guerrillas a potentially important new capability in their war against the Sandinista regime.

The contras already have 14 aircraft at a secret air base in Honduras, rebel officials say. They look forward to acquiring the three planes that are being rebuilt in California's San Diego County — aging, propeller-driven aircraft donated by retired U.S. Air Force officers — and they are seeking still more.

So far, none of the 12 planes and two helicopters at the base has been equipped for combat, contra officials say. Instead, the fledgling air force is being used chiefly to transport and resupply guerrilla units all over Nicaragua — “to fight the way the Viet Cong did in

Vietnam, only with the added advantage of air supply,” said a CIA veteran who is helping in the effort.

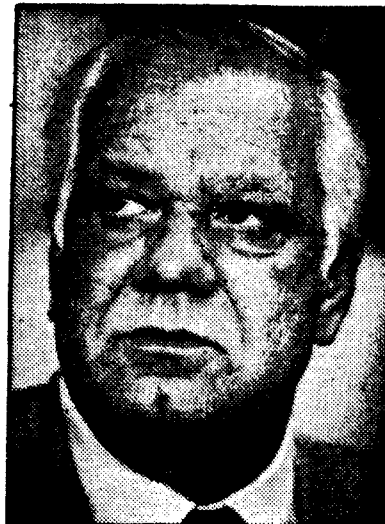
At this point, the contra air force is still badly outmatched by the Sandinista air force of at least 43 aircraft. And, according to all accounts, it has been largely ineffective, with many of its aircraft grounded for lack of maintenance and many of its pilots hesitant to fly missions that would expose them to fire from the Sandinistas' Soviet-made helicopter gunships.

“It's been a real hip-pocket operation,” said Edwin Dearborn, a former CIA pilot who has been helping to organize the force. “There have been times when we've run out of gas.”

Already, the contras may be the first guerrilla insurgency in history with its own airlift wing. But in the future, the contras say, they also will be looking for combat aircraft as a means of escalating the war against the Marxist-led Sandinistas even further.

“We want to use every weapon that will help us bring democracy to Nicaragua,” said Adolfo Calero, chief of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the largest contra army. “If we can get more airplanes, so much the better.”

“We're looking for people to



Adolfo Calero: Says planes key weapon in contra fight.

contribute both money and airplanes,” said Dearborn, a Newport Beach, Calif., resident.

Dearborn is overseeing the reconstruction of the three donated airplanes for the contras in San Diego County; he talked about them on condition that their precise location not be disclosed. The aircraft include a 1958-vintage Cessna L-19 spotter plane, a Cessna 337 utility plane and a Helio Courier short-takeoff-and-landing plane.

“If we had four of these, we'd be in pig heaven,” he said, slapping the fuselage of the Helio Courier. “You can carry 2,000 pounds on these and land on a 400-foot runway chopped out of the jungle. If some guy wants to see his name on there [as a donor], all it'll take is \$40,000.”

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